

13. THE GROCERY STORE

“I’m not from around here. This place makes me a little confused.”

“One grocery store is pretty much like another.”

“There all a mystery to me.”

“Each aisle is coded for similar products. Down one is prepared meats, down another bread, down another fruit juices.”

“Where’s olive oil?”

“With cooking oils.” He points down one of the aisles.

“It will take me a year to remember all this. And I still don’t know which olive oil I should buy. The imported or the domestic. The extra virgin. The premium. All too many varieties to make sense of.”

“Where are you from? You seem like you just arrived from another planet.”

“I’m from the Ukraine.”

“You don’t have a trace of an accent.”

“I went to an English school.”

“What are you doing in the States?”

“I just got married to man who lives here.”

“Just got married?”

“I met him through one of those services.”

“Is it a happy marriage?”

“It seems to be. Although I don’t see him much. He’s at work a lot.”

“He doesn’t make you do all the house work.”

“I do most of it gladly.”

“If he’s got you as an unpaid domestic, he’s really got a real bargain.”

“What do yo mean?”

“How much would he have to pay for a maid service for ten years?”

“What if the marriage doesn’t last that long?”

“Is there a reason to say that?”

“I don’t know. He seems to be nice man.”

“Just as long as he’s getting what he wants. What kind of man would buy a bride off the internet?”

“A man too buys with work.”

“A man who can’t communicate with a real person.”

“We talk!”

“I’m glad that you do. What does he say? Does he ask you to get him breakfast?”

“It’s not all that bad.”

“He get his own breakfast.”

“No, I make all the meals.”

“Have you thought about getting a job? Or maybe taking some classes?”

“He wouldn’t want me doing any of that.”

“Have you asked him about that?”

“It’s come up. But he kept changing the subject. I think that he’s afraid of me meeting

other men.”

“What does he have to be afraid of if he’s such a prince among men?”

“I think that he invested so much of himself in trying to bring me over that it would devastate him if he thought that I was going to leave him.”

“But he’s not even giving you a chance to be yourself. What kind of marriage is that going to be?”

“I don’t want to analyze things in such detail. It wouldn’t be fair to either of us. We just need some time.”

“Time is good. But you’re already married to him.”

“So we can take the time to get to know each other.”

“And I can take some time to get to know you.”

“That might not be such a great idea.”

“I could help you with your shopping.”

“That sounds like a great compromise.”

“Did you make a list?”

“It’s all in my head.”

“You tell me what you need, and I will tell where to find it.”

“Where do we start?”

“I don’t know. It’s your shopping list. Let’s start with love. I’ll tell you where to find it.”

“I’m just looking for a good time.”

“That’s the chips and salsa aisle. I would recommend the gourmet chips.”

“What’s that: twice the money for half the chips?”

“No, it’s a big bag with crunchy textured chips. Not the processed kind.”

“It’s all processed if you don’t make it yourself.”

“So let’s go back to your place and ground the corn.”

“Again, not a good idea.”

“Well, you buy the chips and the salsa. And you can think about me while you eat them.”

“Won’t he know?”

“How could he?”

“If he doesn’t like chips and salsa, he might suspect me.”

“Let him. A little mystery helps a marriage.”

“I feel that I should be honest about everything.”

“American girls need a good secret from their husbands now and then.”

“Like what’s really in the chips and salsa.”

“Exactly. Just make sure if you include arsenic, that you blend it well.”

“You are trying to pull a fast one on me. I never said that I hated my husband.”

“Give it time. You really can’t call it an American marriage if there isn’t something a little crazy running around the wife’s head.”

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t really know. I’m just making it up as I go along.”

“It looks like my basket is pretty full.”

“Yes, it does. Time to check out.”

“Let me help you put the items on the belt.”

“I don’t want to get them confused with that women’s stuff. She has enough food to feed an army. And all those big vats of ice cream.”

“Wow! Let me get a divider.”

“Don’t you think that people will get suspicious if they see you helping me check out?”

“No one is going to report me to your husband if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“They’re not going to gossip.”

“This is a big city.”

“What if I see my neighbors here?”

“Wave and move on!

Roger greeted Pat as he came in.

“What’s all the racket?”

“I was just putting the groceries away.”

“I thought that you were going to send me out to shop.”

“I was. But then I was passing the store. So I decided to stop in. Guess what?”

“I don’t know.”

“I met a girl from the Ukraine.”

“You went ahead and spent the ten thousand.”

“No, it was at the supermarket.”

“Who was she?”

“Her name was Marika. She’s a mail order bride.”

“I thought that you said that you didn’t spend the money.”

“She’s not mine.”

“Why are you so excited.”

“I think that she really likes me.”

“So what! Has she married the guy yet?”

“Yeah. But I think that he’s just using her to clean his place. It’s pretty shocking.”

“You should mind your own business. If the guy catches you, there will be hell to pay.”

“What do I have to be afraid of. This is a free country.”

“Think about it. Some guy spent ten thousand dollars to bring her over here. And then some other guy snatches her up. He’s not going to want to lose his investment.”

“But if he gets reported to Immigration, he’ll be fucked.”

“And you’re going to get mixed up in this. This has nothing to do with you.”

“She really likes me.”

“That’s really great. But there’s nothing that you can or should do about it. Go find real girl.”

“She is real. We met in the supermarket. And we got on great together. Count your losses, put away your groceries, and forget about her.”

“I can’t forget about her. She’s so fantastic.”

“She’d be a lot more fantastic if she wasn’t already with someone.”

“I don’t think that I can let her go.”

“Let her go. You’re making it sound as if you spent the money. I told you that it was all a stupid idea. Now you see how silly it is. It was a good thing that you didn’t spend the ten

thousand.”

“But I met Marika. And she is perfect.”

“You had Sunny’s portfolio, and she was perfect. How can they all be so perfect?”

“I don’t know.”

“Get a plane ticket, and head off to the Ukraine.”

“It’s going to be a lot cheaper to meet Marika at the grocery store next Tuesday.”

“You do that. But if her husband confronts you in the parking lot with a gun, don’t come crying to me.”

Marika pushed the cart down the aisles. He followed slightly behind her. It was his job to pick up the items that she called out.

“There are all these kinds of apples. Some of them I know from my country, but a lot of them are new to me.”

“How do you like your apples? A little tart. Or massively sweet.”

“What kind of apple did Eve tempt Adam with?”

They both laughed.

“You have lovely smile. The smile of an angel.”

She perked up after he complimented her.

“Did you pick out some apples for me?”

“I did. Special apples just for you.”

“That sounds great.”

“Have you ever made an apple pie?”

“Actually I have.”

“Maybe you could make me one.”

“If I can ever get away long enough.”

“You could make it at your place, and bring it over to me.”

“I’m going to need some flour.”

“Do you want self-rising flour.”

“What’s that?”

“You don’t have to add yeast or baking powder. It rises on its own.”

“Get me a couple of those.”

“And some oil. Do you use safflower oil.”

“Safflower?”

“It’s low in saturated fat.”

“Is that good?”

“Good for baking and in salads.”

“Sounds good.”

“Do you have anything in the house?”

“There’s loads of stuff. Remember all the stuff that I got last week.”

“What else is on the list?”

“Should I bake cookies, or should I buy them?”

“You could do both. But you’re going to be busy making me an apple pie.”

“I like oatmeal cookies.”

“What about chocolate chip?”

“Or chocolate double fudge.”

“Or chocolate marshmallow.”

“Or marshmallow double fudge.”

“Too many sweets. Let’s go buy something healthy.”

“I’m supposed to say that.”

“Your basket is almost full. Time to check out.”

“Maybe I should buy a bottle of grocery store wine.”

“It’s going to be a great dinner. Maybe I’ll stop on by.”

“Sure you will.”

Roger heard Pat come in after the shopping trip.

“You didn’t bring anything for us.”

“We have more than enough food here.”

“Are you falling for this girl?”

“I’m having fun. I know what it is.”

“You do like her a lot.”

“I’m not like you Roger. I can be friends with a woman.”

“But you want more than friendship.”

“What of it?”

“She’s leading you on.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I’m experienced with this shit. She’s using you to test the waters. But she’s going to go back to her husband every time. When she finally realizes how far she can go, she’s going to find some other guy. And you’ll both be left holding the bag.”

“We’re friends.”

“Guys try to get all noble with girls. But that’s not what a girl is looking for. Women like to be touched. And if you don’t give her what she needs, she’s going to find it somewhere else.”

“She’s got a husband.”

“And she’s running off to you for a little sexual healing. And what are you doing? You’re taking her shopping. If that’s what she wanted, she’d get a shopping service.”

“If I tried to touch, she’d run back home. She’s with me because I’m not that kind of guy.”

“Take my word for it. You’re just a shoulder to cry. You’re never going to be the guy who makes love to her.”

“I have other girls.”

“You’re thinking about her all the time. Haven’t you been checking all those sites about the Ukraine?”

“You’re being silly!”

“No, you are. Find an American girl, and give her some good loving. Let Miss Ukraine go back to her husband. He paid for her.”

“Maybe she’s not really happy with him.”

“That’s not your problem. She has a husband, and she has to work it out with him. You can’t come between them.”

"I'm not trying to. I just want her to feel at home in a new country."

"She can figure out the grocery store on her own. There's grocery stores in Kiev. She is working you."

"It's not like that at all."

"Then what? Did you even get phone number?"

"No. But she has mine in case of an emergency."

"Shit. She is going to call you."

"What?"

"Take my word for it. She is going to call you all crying and shit. I've seen this happen before."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Tell her that you have to study Psychology. Tell her anything. But don't go to her rescue. She is fucking with you. "

"Why are you so mean?"

"I'm not mean. I'm honest. I don't want her messing with my friend."

"You don't want me to have fun."

"Go ahead: knock yourself out. But she's not going to give you anything resembling fun."

Around three in the morning, Patrick heard his cell phone ring. At first, he thought it was his alarm, and he jumped. Then he froze in his bed. He was too tired to answer it. Finally, he picked it up before voice mail kicked in.

"I need you to meet me."

There was an all night restaurant about a mile from campus. She was waiting for him at a table.

"Are you going to order anything?" she asked him."

"Just some coffee."

"I'm going to eat. It will settle me down."

"What happened?"

"Nothing serious."

"Huh?"

"I mean it's serious. But there's no danger."

"Tell me about it."

"I don't know what set him off. Maybe it was dinner. But he started to scream at me. I couldn't understand half of what he said. He was cursing and throwing things."

"Did he hit you?"

"He didn't hit me. I didn't give him a chance. But he was throwing things. I kept apologizing. But I had no idea what he was angry about. He would settle down. And I would think that everything was OK. Then he would just start all over again. And I'd have to calm him down again."

"So you ran out on him."

"I waited until he finally passed out. I just snuck out."

"Was he drinking?"

"I didn't buy any alcohol. Except the wine. And he didn't have any of that. He told me

that he doesn't drink wine."

"Are you going to go back?"

"I have to. He told me that he'd tell Immigration that I was trying to swindle him out of his money if I didn't cooperate."

"You can't keep living with him."

"I think that he just had a bad night. He'll be OK tomorrow."

"Tomorrow, he could go over the edge."

"I can deal with him."

"He's a lunatic."

"I'm going to be OK."

She went back to eating. This was her way to deal with the stress. Roger would have doubted that any of this had actually happened. But she looked too harried to be faking it. Marika's husband sounded totally crazy.

"Call me if anything else happens. Give me your address now. I'll be right there if you need me. I'm a phone call away!"

Sure enough, Roger was skeptical.

"She is really pushing all your buttons."

"How so?"

"No bruises. She wants to see if she can sneak out on him at night. This won't be the first time that she calls you in the middle of the night. And once she succeeds at getting out late at night, she's going to disappear for a day or two at a time. She's just seeing how much her husband will take before he seeks an annulment of the marriage."

"That will send her back to the Ukraine."

"She's a really smart girl. She's on the look out for some new guy to take her off her husband's hands."

"You're wrong about her. I could see the tears."

"They were crocodile tears. The only person that she cares about is herself. She was performing for you. You should have just stayed up with a movie rental. It would have been more real."

"You're not being fair at all to the girl. She's the one dealing with one crazy son of a bitch."

"It's my guess that he's doing nothing wrong. He's just a simple man. And he doesn't have that much to offer a high-flier like her. She's not going to lower her sights for some nobody. So she makes up this story to such you in. And you are the big fish taking the hook."

"You are better at spinning a yarn than she is."

"Let it go, boy. You are way out of your league. She works for a bunch of con artists. And now she is setting up the big con."

"I don't have that much money. It's my family's money. She's not going to be able to touch any of it."

"You're not the mark. You're more like a stepping stone. She's testing you just like she's testing her husband. This is all a preparation for some guy who she's going to meet in the future who going to be the focus of her affections. And she is going to really fuck him up. Meanwhile, she needs you to get the confidence to faced down her husband."

“You really think that you have her pegged.”

“I should know. Girls have tried that shit with me. It’s just that it never works.”

“You hate women. So you never give them a chance to hurt you. You just push them to get nasty on you.”

“It doesn’t work like that. There are angels and demons. And you have a demon. You need to see that before she really destroys you.”

“You’re just jealous that the story isn’t about you for once.”

“Patrick, you’re being an idiot. Be enough of an adult to admit that to yourself.”

“So if she calls in the middle of the night, I should ignore her.”

“That is what you have to do.”

“What if he actually hits her. She is going to need my help.”

“That’s what the police are for.”

“But if she calls the police, he may try to report her.”

“From what you told me, she has lot more of a case. Unless of course, she’s lying. She can’t be lying.”

“I just have to look into her eyes to know that she’s telling the truth.”

The next time that she went shopping, she told me that she didn’t need Patrick’s help.

“He’s watching my every move.”

“You’re not exaggerating.”

“Not in the least.”

“Doesn’t he have to be at work.”

“I think that he’s sneaking out to follow me.”

“Did he follow you to the grocery store?”

“I’m not sure. He shows up when I least expect it.”

“We should meet somewhere.”

“I don’t think that I can get away.”

“You have to take a risk.”

“I have this feeling that he’s going to get violent.”

“He still hasn’t hit you.”

“Heavens no. If he did, I’d be on the phone first thing to you.”

Patrick was sure if she had just dodged a major crisis. But he could hardly make a big deal about a shopping trip. He really considered the possibility that Roger was right. If she was in the middle of a disaster, it was better for him just to let her go.

He looked around the apartment. He needed to do some shopping for both Roger and himself. He made a list. Then he set off in the car. He made sure that he wasn’t going to same shopping center.

As he made his way through the store, he saw a woman in a flower-print dress. He smiled at her.

“What do you think of these cantaloupes? Are they ripe?”

She didn’t say a thing. She just smiled back. She didn’t want to be part of his adventure. She wasn’t like Marika.

He wished that he could call Marika. He could share his story about the grocery store.

“You didn’t go out with her today.”

“She told me that it wouldn’t be a good idea.”

“You believed her.”

“She told me that her husband was following her.”

“That sounds ridiculous. If you really wanted to see her, you should have told her.

Everything else is bull shit!”

“I do want to see her. But it didn’t seem like a good time.”

“Good time. She was fucking going shopping.”

“I have to be respectful of her.”

“I hope that she’s being just as considerate about you.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“What you are doing; the big nothing. Let her go.”

“What if she calls?”

“Drop everything that you’re doing, and just go running to her.”

“Are you kidding?”

“Don’t you have some Psychology homework to do?”

“I do!”

“Well, you better do it!

“I guess that you’re right.”

Roger’s irony was being lost on Patrick. It was as if he was too far gone for good advice. He was just waiting for the other shoe to fall.

“What the fuck are you calling my wife for.”

Patrick has answered the phone thinking that it was Marika. Instead, it was an irate man on the other end of the line.

“I went through her phone, and I found that she’s been calling you. She’s my wife. You have no business talking to her. If I find out where you live, I’m going to come over there and kill you.”

“I should call the police on you.”

“Call them. I’ll tell them that you and Marika have been in collusion to defraud me of money. And you’ll go to jail.”

“I have nothing to fear from you.”

“The hell you don’t. I am going to get a gun and shoot your balls off.”

Patrick wasn’t sure if he wanted to deal with these threats. Maybe he should tell the husband that it was all a misunderstanding.

“This is the twenty-first century. You can no longer treat women as if they are your slaves.”

“You have a big mouth for someone that I can’t see. I am going to kill you when I find you.”

“Who the hell are you to threaten me?”

“I’m the one who paid to bring Marika here. And she is a lazy girl. She doesn’t even do the shopping most of the time. The house is a mess. She spends all the time watching TV and eating candy. I’ve told her to get a job. At least get out of the house. She mocks me.”

“That isn’t how she tells it.”

“She came here to fuck no good bastard like you. She doesn’t act like a wife. She is a

slut!”

“Maybe if you treated her a little better.”

“I give her money. I buy her clothes. I do everything for her. I got her this cell phone for emergencies. But she uses it to make illicit liaisons with types like you.”

“I’ve never even kissed her.”

“You expect me to believe you. I know Marika. She’s a sex fiend. She’s always getting in to conversations with the car repairman, or the salesman at the store. Always some new guy.”

“She told me how you were violent.”

“Me. I’m the one who should be afraid that she gets one of her lovers to kill me.”

“She’ not like that at all. She’s a beautiful woman.”

“You only think about her for one reason. You know that I will find you. The law doesn’t look too fondly on guys like you who sleep with other people’s wives.”

“I never slept with her.”

“So why did she sneak out at three one morning?”

“You were having a fight with her.”

“I was asleep. When I woke up in the morning, she wasn’t there.”

“You’re lying. I know that you are. She was upset when she met me as if you had been brutalizing her.”

“The only person that I’m going to brutalize is you because of how you tried to take advantage of her.”

“I want you to quit calling my number, or I will report you to the police.”

“Good luck!”

Roger was not so forgiving.

“She fucked you over. Then she let you and her husband have it out. She is nothing but grief. There are loads of wonderful girls out there who would care for you.”

“None of them are like her.”

“She hasn’t even kissed you. Let it go!”

“I can’t. I have to see her.”

“She’ll only see you on her time. With her husband involved, she is going to push things until you actually confront him.”

“How is she going to do that?”

“He already feels justified to kill you. Don’t give him any more reason.”

“I didn’t do anything.”

“You have been meeting his wife in secret. Does he need any more reason?”

“He is nuts.”

“Because you and she have been fucking with his head.”

“That was only when she started to take advantage of things.”

“He brought her here to be a servant.”

“That is how she tells it. Her husband says that she lies around all day doing nothing. He even asked her to get a job, and she refused. In her story, she told you that she can’t even leave the house.”

“I saw her at the grocery store.”

“Where else? At a restaurant. She is setting you both up.”

“How?”

“When was the last time that you heard from her.”

“She told me that he was following her. Then he stole her phone.”

“All she does is make up stories. You can’t believe a single thing that she says. She is an utter and complete liar.”

“You are only hearing what you want to hear.”

“Do you want to deal with her husband? If he really is a threat, she needs to go to the police. She can’t get you involved.”

“She needs my help.”

“To do what? To find another sucker to take the place of both of you. She offers nothing. And she drains you of all her energy.”

“Roger, you are a cynic.”

“Even if she was a wonderful girl, she is still trying to mess with your head. She has shown no romantic interest in you at all.”

“I told you that she was my friend.”

“Keep it that way. And don’t even talk to her until she gets things cleared up.”

“If she calls me at night and she needs my help, I am going to go running to her.”

“He is looking for an excuse to kill you. Don’t give him one. If she calls in need of help, call the police. He sounds psycho. Don’t push him. He has just cause already.”

“So she should be afraid of him.”

“You’re not married to him; she is.”

“But she still needs my help.”

“The only things that she needs is your silence.”